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SIPDIS

BAGHDAD FOR HOSTAGE WORKING GROUP

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: FRENCH EX-HOSTAGE DISCUSSES "PLANET BIN LADEN"

REF: A. FBIS EUP20041227000250

[B](#). PARIS 107

[C](#). 04 PARIS 9048 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT, FOR REAS
ONS 1.4 B/D

[1](#). (C) Summary: Georges Malbrunot, one of two French journalists held hostage in Iraq for just over four months and released on December 21, recounted to Emboffs on January 12 his experience in captivity and his surprise that his captors were not focused solely on combating Coalition forces in Iraq but rather, on the goals of radical Islam. Though convinced at the outset of his captivity that the hostage-takers were only interested in Iraq, Malbrunot's thinking on this subject changed to the extent that the account he wrote of his captivity, which came out nine days after his release, is entitled "Malbrunot: I lived on Planet Bin Laden" (reftel). End summary.

[2](#). (S/NF) Malbrunot, who works for the center-right daily newspaper Le Figaro, met with Emboffs at our request to discuss his captivity. He and fellow ex-hostage Christian Chesnot, who works for state-supported Radio France Internationale, continue to be debriefed on the operational/technical details of their captivity by French intelligence, analysis of which will be sent through other channels.

ENGAGING THEIR CAPTORS

[3](#). (C) Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot, two veteran French journalists reporting from Iraq, were kidnapped on August 20, 2004 by the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI). According to Malbrunot, the two immediately stated in Arabic (both are fluent) that they were French journalists and had no connection with Coalition forces. Luckily, no shots were fired and they were not physically harmed. This contrasted, said Malbrunot, with treatment they witnessed of other hostages, including Macedonians, Lebanese and an official of Ahmad Chalabi's "INC" party (who Malbrunot said was later beheaded). For example, they observed Lebanese hostages being blindfolded and shackled. Though initially they were put in a small, dark room and made to sleep on the floor, their conditions soon improved and they were given blankets and food. In keeping with the IAI's organized structure they observed throughout their captivity, they were told that their identity was being verified by a separate committee and that following this, their case would be judged by a "Islamic tribunal." They were also questioned a number of times by IAI intelligence operatives. At first, the IAI planned to execute their Syrian national driver, Mohamed al-Joundi, because of suspicion that he was a CIA spy sent to keep tabs on the two journalists and also due to a fake photo montage in Joundi's possession which showed him with an American general. Malbrunot and Chesnot convinced their captors not to proceed with his execution, saying he was not a spy and on the contrary, was extremely anti-American, and had even turned down a scholarship to study in the United States. (Note: As reported ref B, Joundi has filed suit in French courts against U.S. military officials for alleged torture, while claiming that the IAI treated him well and was beyond reproach. The suit is pending and awaits a judge's decision on whether to accept jurisdiction. End note.)

[4](#). (C) In the first days of their captivity, Malbrunot and Chesnot believed that their captors were interested solely in "fighting the occupation," and that once it was clear to them that the French people and government were opposed to operations in Iraq, their liberation might be quick. However, the two eventually realized that the IAI was interested primarily in the goals of Salafism and other tenets of radical Islam, with Iraq being a target of opportunity because of the concentration and presence of Western forces. It was around the time that the hostage-takers cited France's "veil" law (which forbids the wearing of 'ostentatious' religious symbols in French primary and secondary schools) as an impediment to the journalists' release that Malbrunot realized the IAI was not focused exclusively on the Coalition presence in Iraq. Their captors often discussed their Islamic beliefs and told the two journalists that converting to Islam would increase their

chances of being freed.

15. (C) Malbrunot's captors said openly that they considered Osama bin Laden their "chief" and that their long-term goals were the restoration of the Caliphate, the battle with the West, and the installation of Islamic regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Also, the journalist was surprised at the extent to which bin Laden was a reference point for the IAI. The leader of the group guarding them had spent time in terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, a fact that increased the amount of deference he received from others. Malbrunot did not believe that the Iraqis holding him and Chesnot had been secular under Saddam and only recently had taken up the banner of radical Islam. Rather, he surmised that some were ex-Baathists who had kept their Islamist leanings hidden under Saddam. Others were likely longtime Islamists who had already been active in places like Samarra, though kept under tight control by the former regime, especially in the 1990s as Saddam tried to boost his Islamic credentials. Their knowledge of France appeared dated - they spoke of the French war in Algeria and French participation in the 1990 Gulf War Coalition, another sign of pro-Saddam sympathy among some IAI members. Paradoxically, other IAI members (presumably anti-Saddam) suspected the US was allied with Saddam and would soon restore him to power. When Malbrunot said that was unlikely, they remained skeptical. His captors often mentioned the presence and influence of non-Iraqis in the IAI, especially Saudis and Yemenis, but Malbrunot never saw anyone but those he believed by their accents to be Iraqi.

16. (C) The hostage-takers did not focus on subjects such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the presence of U.S. troops in the Middle East outside of Iraq. Instead, said Malbrunot, they were consumed with what he termed "the logic of destruction." Oftentimes, they would disappear during the day and come back later only to explain that they had been very busy placing bombs against the "occupiers" or destroying pipelines. They never discussed plans or ideas for Iraq following the withdrawal of Coalition troops. Their single-minded focus, said Malbrunot, was destruction, both in Iraq and outside. To this end, they spoke of "bringing the fight to Europe," although they did not specify whether they meant recruitment, fund-raising or operations. They also discussed the need to isolate the U.S. by driving a wedge between it and Europe.

RELATIONS WITH OTHER GROUPS

17. (C) Malbrunot's captors boasted that the IAI had 15,000 - 17,000 adherents, a figure that the journalist found exaggerated. They said that other terrorist groups in Iraq, including Zarqawi's Ansar al-Islam, shared their goals and methods, but that they did not coordinate strategy. When targets of opportunity and coordination existed - for example, during the Coalition move on Fallujah - the Islamist groups did cooperate, but only on an ad hoc and operational level. Malbrunot said he had been told that the IAI leadership were all based in Baghdad and furthermore, his captors appeared to take instructions from the capital. He added that the IAI hostage-takers spoke of other Salafist groups such as the GSPC in Algeria and the GICM in Morocco, and said they belonged to the same "family," although the IAI didn't appear to have taken on the anti-French focus of the North African terrorist groups.

18. (C) The journalist's Sunni IAI captors told him that their enemies were Coalition forces, the Shiites and the Kurds, although their focus was on operations against the Coalition. Within the Coalition, they did not differentiate between the U.S. and others; to the IAI, all were "dogs" and subject to immediate execution. Malbrunot said the IAI showed contempt as well for Ayatollah Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr, and viewed President al-Yawer as the "Queen of England," i.e. above politics and treated differently, but with no power.

19. (C) Malbrunot told Emboffs that he believes they were captured as targets of opportunity. He had stopped by the side of a road to place a satellite phone call to France, and believes they were spotted by the hostage-takers at that point. Furthermore, he believes that, in general, all hostages in Iraq are taken as the opportunity and circumstances arise, and that only those at the highest levels are specifically targeted. He said the "top 3" targets for the IAI were Iraqi PM Allawi, Defense Minister Hazem Sha'alan and former Iraqi National Security Advisor Mowaffah al Rubaiye.

110. (C) Malbrunot's captors were particularly interested in French domestic reaction to the two hostages. They were less interested in the international reaction organized by the French government, to include statements condemning the hijacking by Arab governments and even Hezbollah (who the IAI considered as sharing their beliefs and doing a good job

fighting Israel despite being Shiite). Nevertheless, Malbrunot believed that the international pressure helped, in that it made it easier for the IAI to consider entering negotiations with the French government to release them and helped boost the group's ego given its raised profile.

LESSONS LEARNED

11. (C) The hostage-takers were remarkably at ease in their surroundings, said Malbrunot. Even during periods when the journalists were transferred to different areas, they never seemed worried that they would be apprehended or discovered by Coalition forces. One place they stayed was on a farm with a family sympathetic to the IAI. Only at the end, when transfer was imminent, did the hostage-takers seem nervous. Malbrunot believed this was because of a constant paranoia regarding plots and double-crossing. Despite all evidence to the contrary, the IAI accused Malbrunot and Chesnot multiple times of working with the CIA and even suspected at one point that the French Ambassador to Iraq was a CIA agent.

12. (C) During the first days of their captivity, Malbrunot and Chesnot asked questions of their captors. However, the reaction of the IAI guards was very negative, and the French journalists decided to remain quiet and only respond when asked direct questions. This seemed to work better, and some of their captors even began volunteering information. Malbrunot believes that his and Chesnot's fluency in Arabic was key to building a rapport with their captors, though he speculated that such an ability would do nothing to help an American or UK hostage, who would be killed regardless. Even though they had no doubt that if the order arrived, the IAI guards would execute them, the journalists' ability to speak Arabic cut through some of the initial and subsequent suspicions.

13. (C) Without offering specifics, Malbrunot said he believes the French government paid a ransom to free them. He applauded the actions of the GOF and specifically, the DGSE (the French external intelligence service), saying that in hostage situations, even democracies like the U.S. and France have to engage with unsavory characters. He raised the Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s to seek the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon as a past example. Only the UK does not negotiate with terrorists, said Malbrunot. He also praised the GOF's so-called "turban diplomacy" in securing condemnation of the kidnapping from Islamic extremist groups and clerics as a wise and effective strategy.

14. (C) In closing, Malbrunot said he remained a pessimist regarding Iraq. Saying "Iraqis are very tough to occupy" and the U.S. had made too many mistakes, he believed that the situation had little chance of improving soon. He especially criticized the decision to dissolve Iraqi intelligence agencies, given that they had kept close tabs on Islamists during Saddam's reign and subsequently, much of that knowledge was lost.

15. (C) Comment: Many in France share Malbrunot's initial belief that the insurgents in Iraq are focused primarily in forcing the departure of Coalition troops from Iraq and motivated by nationalist aspirations. Malbrunot's discovery that, on the contrary, he was on "Planet Bin Laden" was, as he said, a surprise. It may also have been surprising to a France that often appears to react differently to radical Islam depending on its distance from it. Within its borders, it reacts proactively, with speed and harshness. Elsewhere in the world, it is much more equivocal. (For example, FM Barnier's decision to meet last September with extremist cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who later called for the killing of Americans in Iraq without drawing a French rebuke.) Malbrunot's realization of the true nature of the insurgency may not change French intransigence on Iraq, but it may demonstrate to his readers the stakes involved and the risks to France. End comment.

16. (U) Minimize considered.
Leach